

ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?
MATTHEW 5:1-12
ALL SAINTS' DAY NOVEMBER 1, 1987

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Someone said, "Many people have finally realized that money can't buy happiness. Now they're trying credit cards!" The converse is equally provocative. Someone asked, "What good is happiness if it doesn't bring you money?" Are we perhaps confused about money, happiness, things, pleasure, joy and fun? Can't you hear our society in the midst of plenty, plaintively asking, "Are we having fun yet?" And, as Christians, some ask, "Is it right to have fun?"

Last week I made the point that the kingdom of God is like a party; being in relationship with God is like a party; the church is a happy, joyful, celebrative fellowship. No one disagreed with me, at least publicly. No one debated my point, but didn't some think I was being naive or at least, simplistic? What about evil? What about injustice? What about war? What about little children who are hungry, living on the streets, or in their cars, or in drug-infested slums? Does a Christian ignore what is wrong in this world by having fun? Are we so oblivious and calloused that we seek to escape from reality by building ourselves a nice little nest here in the church, a nest of warmth and fun, shutting out the cries of the world?

Today is All Saints' Day, when the church has traditionally honored the saints. What about those saints who followed their Lord even to death? What about those who were martyred? Did they experience the church and their relationship with God as a party, a happy celebration? What about death? Later in the service we will read the names of some of our church's saints who died this past year. Their spouses and their families are left mourning. There is now an empty chair, a quiet house. "This is a party?" you may ask. After all, even Jesus didn't exactly spend his last days whooping it up in fun! At his last party with his friends, one of them left early in order to betray him, and Jesus knew it. The next day, he died on a cross--a painful, humiliating death. This is fun?

Christians sometimes feel guilty about being happy. Is it right to have fun, they ask? Can we legitimately have fun while the cities burn, while people starve, while tragedy strikes? Can we have fun while people die? We have often felt guilty about having fun in the midst of sadness, so we have designed worship services full of guilt, gloom and doom, rather than happy, joyful celebrations. Is it right to have fun?

Let's look again at our model, Jesus. Was Jesus a happy person? Did Jesus ignore the sufferings of his day, and escape into a fantasy world of fun? YES, Jesus was a happy person. NO, he did not escape from suffering. YES, he got involved in the suffering of his day. And, YES, he had fun. Being happy and being caring are not mutually exclusive. Jesus did care, and Jesus did enjoy life. It is wrong to picture Jesus in paintings as someone sad and mournful. YES, Jesus mourned, but he was happy. We know Jesus was a happy person who enjoyed life and had fun, because he enjoyed children, and they enjoyed him. Furthermore, one of the popular criticisms leveled against Jesus was that he enjoyed parties. He wined and dined with the street people, the poor, and the outcasts. Jesus believed in being happy and being involved in the hurts of the world at the same time. Could it be that our confusion arises from an inadequate, or even erroneous, definition of joy? Could it be that we are not sure what real joy is?

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Let's look further to Jesus, especially this morning to one of his revolutionary teachings, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12. Jesus was surrounded by a crowd of people. They had come from all over the area. His fame had spread even to Jerusalem, and across the Jordan River to the ten Roman cities called the Decapolis which are now ruins in the country of Jordan. Seeing there were so many people, Jesus took them to a natural amphitheater on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The mountain is now called the Mount of Beatitudes, and today looks probably like it looked in Jesus' day, except for a small church and gardens which have been built by the Franciscans. There is a place near the base of the mountain where a speaker can stand and have his/her voice naturally projected up the hill so everyone can hear. You can't imagine a more serene, peaceful, beatific setting for a school room. The hill rises out of the lake, so as you sit on the hillside, you look at the speaker with the blue, rolling, majestic lake as a backdrop. It was there that Jesus opened his mouth and taught them about happiness and joy.

Many of us have missed the point of these teachings. I have been so busy interpreting what Jesus meant by "poor in spirit," "meek," etc., that I have missed the point. I have mistakenly considered the Beatitudes to be standards of behavior, as challenges to us, rather than a prescription for happiness. Jesus is giving a course in happiness, joy and fun. If he came to Palo Alto today, he would hold a seminar at Rickey's Hyatt, and be interviewed on television. But his material is quite different from our modern prophets. His prescription for happiness is quite different from the anemic talks we hear about love and success. His prescription is tried by a very few people, but when they do, they discover they are having fun. They discover joy.

A great deal is lost in the English translation of the Beatitudes. The word "blessed" just does not convey the impact of what Jesus meant. Some of the English translations use the word "happy" which immediately gives us a different interpretation than the word "blessed." Listen to the revolutionary words of Jesus as written in the Good News version:

Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor;
the kingdom of heaven belongs to them!
Happy are those who mourn;
God will comfort them!
Happy are those who are humble;
they will receive what God has promised!
Happy are those who greatest desire is to do what God
requires;
God will satisfy them fully!
Happy are those who are merciful to others;
God will be merciful to them!
Happy are the pure in heart;
they will see God!
Happy are those who work for peace;
God will call them his children!
Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what
God requires;
the kingdom of heaven belongs to them!

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Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven.

But our word "happy" is still too shallow to convey Jesus' full meaning. We think of "happy hour," or "happy days are here again." Is there a more descriptive word, closer to what Jesus meant? Robert H. Gundry, a New Testament scholar, in his commentary on Matthew, suggests that the word "congratulations" is closer to the original meaning. He claims that the original word meant "to be congratulated in a deeply religious sense, and with more emphasis on divine approval than on human happiness." (p. 68) According to the Oxford Dictionary, to congratulate means to "address a person with expressions of sympathetic joy, and to think oneself fortunate." In the Beatitudes, Jesus seems to be expressing a sympathetic joy and stating that, rather than victimized, you are fortunate.

You feel a deep need for God? You seek affirmation, direction in your life, forgiveness, a new start? Congratulations! You'll get more out of life than rich folk could ever hope to get with all their billions.

You are humble, putting others first, and sometimes getting stepped on in the process? Congratulations! The earth is yours! You experience a joy, happiness, and serenity the bullies will never experience.

You are concerned and bothered about injustice? You work to help those who are downtrodden, oppressed, and victimized by society? You care deeply? You work for peace? Congratulations! You're a child of God. You experience satisfaction and joy.

You have experienced persecution when you have stood for the right? You've been ostracized, ridiculed, penalized? Congratulations! You will be rewarded in heaven, and your reward in this life is joy. Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad!" according to the Revised Standard Version, and "Be tremendously glad" according to the Phillips translation.

You mourn? A loved one has died, and you feel lost and alone? Congratulations! Your grief will open doors to deep emotions that the happy-go-lucky will never experience. Now God can touch you deeply. The mother of a ten-year-old boy who died from cancer learned the truth of "Blessed are those who mourn; Happy are those who mourn; Congratulations, you who mourn!" As the family and friends stood by the grave amid crying and solemn stunned faces, the mother asked for the opportunity to pray. The event was made holy when she prayed, "Dear God, thank you for the joy which Jimmy brought into my life; help me to keep the memory of his love, and to be worthy of it as long as there is life in me." Congratulations, young mother who mourns! You have discovered the deep joy and peace of God's comfort.

This isn't a take-two-aspirin-and-call-in-the-morning temporary fix, nor is it a casual look-on-the-bright-side therapy. Jesus is touching one of the tenets of the Gospel--the concept that God can reach us when (and usually only when) we are in a contrite position or a seemingly sad situation, when one is made vulnerable by life, or makes oneself vulnerable by risking on behalf of other people. George Bernard Shaw once defined true joy, "This is the true

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DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievance complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

Sisters and brothers, it's okay to have fun! Laughter, warmth, love, and fellowship belong in the church. But true joy is deeper than pleasure, gratification, money and things. True joy comes from God, comes from being in touch with the Holy Spirit; by feeling deeply, caring deeply, crying deeply, and doing what is right. When we go deeper than the surface level of pleasure, selfish gratification, and greed; down to humility, recognition of our spiritual hunger and need; down to the level of mourning and crying, sharing and caring; there we discover true blessedness, lasting joy, and real fun.

To say it another way: Don't be afraid of admitting need and vulnerability. Don't be afraid to risk when you work for a better world. Don't be afraid to die. Don't be afraid of death. Don't be afraid to let a loved one die; it is not the end. Don't be afraid, for you are blessed. Happy are you! Congratulations! Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad, tremendously glad!"